Jonathan Schaffer

Trumping Preemption
The Case of Merlin

It is a law of magic that the first spell cast on a given day match the enchantment that midnight.
The concept of ‘causation’

i. Law: causes and effects are subsumed under the laws
ii. Explanation: causes explain their effects
iii. Counterfactual implication: causes, were they different, would counterfactually imply different effects
iv. Agency: causes are means to their effects
v. Evidence: causes provide evidence both to and from their effects

Under these concepts, Merlin’s spell is the cause of the prince’s turning into a frog while Morgana’s spell isn’t.
§ Objections and Replies

• [Objection 1]: Shouldn’t laws *supervene* on facts?

* “supervenience”: where there is no difference in the supervenient base, there would be no difference in the supervening higher-level properties.
Q: What is the difference between Fact 1 and Fact 2?

⊙ Fact 1: Merlin’s spell ---- Morgana’s spell ------
the prince turned into a frog.

⊙ Fact 2: Merlin’s spell ---- Morgana’s spell ------
the prince turned into a frog.

* Reply: Laws are merely axiomatization of the facts. They are not logically determined by facts. There must be at least some worlds where the the law described in the present case works.
* [Objection 2] Causation is an empirical concept. Why worry about far-fetched fairy-tale cases like the wizards?

- **Reply:**
  
  (1) We need conceptual analysis.
  
  (2) There *are* empirically plausible trumping scenarios.

[Example: Black, gray, and white sources]
* [Objection 3]

☉ Causation is a folk concept. Even if the wizard case is conceptually possible and the fields case are empirically plausible, both cases are too removed from our habitual assumptions about the world for us to expect our concept of causation to be adequate to them.

Reply:

☉ There are pre-theoretically plausible trumping scenarios. [Example: the major and the sergeant]
Q: Why is *trumping* so special?

* The leading extant refinement of counterfactual theories... all rely on failed intermediaries along the backup process or on would-be difference in the effect absent the main process to distinguish preempting causes from preempted backups.

But: trumping causes and trumped backups are both connected in the causal chain – no missing intermediaries.
Conclusion:

- Extant *counterfactual accounts of causation* (CACs) still cannot handle preemptive causation -- in particular, they cannot handle trumping preemption.
- Of course there may yet be some new strategy for CACs which will prove adequate, but at this point the prospects look dark.
Intermission

Take Five.
John Collins

Preemptive Prevention
Had you not made the catch, I would have caught the ball instead. My leaping to catch the ball made your catch redundant. Given my presence, the ball was never going to hit the window.
Suppose I reach out and catch a passing ball. The next thing along in the ball’s direction of motion was a solid brick wall. Beyond that was a window. Did my action prevent the ball hitting the window?
(1) \( E \) would not have been true had neither \( C \) nor \( D \) been true;

(2) \( E \) would still have been true if exactly one of the propositions \( C \) and \( D \) had been true and the other false.
Causal Chain

- **Counterfactually Dependent chain**: A sequence of true propositions of occurrence in which each proposition is counterfactually dependent on the proposition that precedes it.

- **Quasi-Dependent chain**: An isonomic duplicate (A duplicate of some process is located in the same world, or in a world with the same laws of nature) of a counterfactually dependent chain.
Quasi-Dependence

1. [isonomic duplicate]: A duplicate of some process is located in the same world, or in a world with the same laws of nature.
2. Any isonomic duplicate of a causal process is a causal process.
3. [quasi-dependent chain]: An isonomic duplicate of a counterfactually dependent chain.
4. A causal chain is either a chain of counterfactual dependence or a quasi-dependent chain.
Dependence Prevention

- Your catch prevented the window from breaking and also prevented me from catching the ball when I leapt. By my leap did some preventing as well. It was my leap that prevented the window’s not breaking from being counterfactually dependent on your catch. My leap was a *dependence preventer*. 
A new analysis of ‘causation’:

- $c$ is a cause of $e$ iff there is a chain of counterfactual dependence linking $c$ to $e$, or there would be such a chain were it not for some pure dependence preventer.
Collins’ Critique of Lewis’ ‘Causation as Influence’

1. This new theory of causal influence amounts to a change of topic. Lewis is not offering a new answer to the old question: “what is it for this event to be a cause of that event?” He is rather offering an answer to a quite new question: “what is it for this event to have causal influence on that event?”
2. The relation of cause and effect does not reduce in any obvious way to degree of causal influence. Dependence of the whether-whether kind appears to play a special role in our judgments of what is a cause of what. As it stands, the new theory lacks the resources to identify an event’s causes from among those things that merely had some causal influence on it.
§ Conclusion

Cases of preemptive prevention deserve to be added to the standard set of hard cases against which theories of causation are tested.

I believe that this puzzle is best resolved by thinking in terms of dependence prevention. When the occurrence of one event would have been dependent on another were it not for some dependence preventer, we are often inclined to take this as cause and effect, but provided only that it is not too far-fetched to suppose the dependence preventer absent.